San Jose Mercury News Contra Costa County vows to cast wide net in quest to save Doctors Medical Center

By Tom Lochner Contra Costa Times

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MARTINEZ -- Contra Costa County officials, citing fiscal constraints, doused hopes Tuesday that they would step in and bail out Doctors Medical Center San Pablo, even as they prepared to proclaim a public health emergency should the hospital close in the wake of the recent failure of a \$20 million parcel tax measure.

But the county Board of Supervisors, joined by Health Services Director William Walker and Emergency Medical Services Director Pat Frost, vowed to cast a wide net among businesses, nonprofits and other levels of government in the hope of securing enough short-term funding to keep the hospital open while they scramble to craft a long-term solution.

Shortly after Measure C failed May 6, Doctors interim CEO Dawn Gideon gave the state the required 90-days notice that it would close the hospital, with its 25-bed emergency room. The public district hospital's emergency room, which logs about 40,000 patient visits a year, is slated to close July 25.

A 2011 study warned that closing Doctors' emergency room would overburden the only other West County emergency room at Kaiser Richmond and generate longer ambulance trips to other hospitals in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

The hospital faces an \$18 million deficit next fiscal year, a situation officials blame in large part on low reimbursement rates by Medi-Cal and Medicare, which together cover about 80 percent of Doctors' patients.

The hospital's financial problems are "a symptom of the inequities of our national health care system," said Supervisor John Gioia, who also sits on the hospital's governing board.

The sobering news that the county Health Services Department, which faces a \$20 million deficit of its own next year, cannot step in with funding mostly distressed the approximately 200 doctors, nurses, other hospital employees, union officials, present and former patients and West Contra Costa residents who packed the Board of Supervisors chamber on Tuesday, with the overflow listening to the meeting over loudspeakers in the vestibule.

Jan Gilbrecht, an organizer for the National Union of Healthcare Workers said that "to leave West County without a hospital is genocide."

But Jim Bickert of the Contra Costa County Deputy Sheriffs Association, noting that county dollars are scarce, warned that to "absorb" the hospital could steer the county into insolvency.

Others said indigent patients should be the financial responsibility of the entire county, not just West County taxpayers. To that, Walker noted that the county runs a network of 10 health clinics, including two in West County, along with the county hospital in Martinez and a health insurance plan.

Gideon, citing the obsolescence nationwide of the free-standing hospital model, said DMC needs partners, either corporate or in the public sector. Gioia noted that the effort to find partners and other sources of funding is ongoing; he singled out Chevron, John Muir Health, Kaiser and Sutter Health as prospects.

Sharon Drager, a vascular surgeon, said employees will consider a pay cut. She said the hospital has asked for a grant from Touro University, which uses DMC as a teaching hospital, and that medical staff members have contacted Chevron asking for philanthropy. Other speakers said Chevron should be obligated to chip in, since Doctors treats victims of accidents at the refinery.

The board of the West Contra Costa Healthcare District, which owns the hospital, is expected to discuss the closure issue at a May 28 meeting.

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